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SUBJECT: Former Comoran President Azali Watching, Waiting

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Former Comoran President Azali told Comoros Officer February 17 he is concerned about President Sambi's "dangerous and unconstitutional" actions. He believes Sambi cares too much about foreign friends (like Iran) and is losing touch with the Comoran people; especially Imams who view Sambi's Shi'ism as an affront to Comoran Sunni Islam. Azali said the African Union, United Nations, France, and others were naove in their dealings with Sambi; he called on the United States to talk bluntly to the President about the dangers of his referendum. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Former President Azali explained to Comoros Officer February 17 a litany of offenses by his successor, President Sambi, that he said endanger the unity and stability of the Comoros. By naming four of seven judges to the Constitutional Court, Azali said Sambi had already co-opted the judicial branch. Elections have still not been held for island assemblies in Anjouan and Moheli; Azali fears Sambi will similarly allow the mandates of the National Assembly and Grande Comore deputies to lapse, thus freeing himself of the checks of a legislative branch. Even while the National Assembly still exists, Azali said, Sambi works around them, as he did by promulgating the "economic citizenship law" without -- in his view -- proper approval.

¶3. (SBU) Azali emphasized key proposed constitutional revisions contained in Sambi's referendum, most notably an extension of his term of office one year to 2011. "How can Mohelians (whose turn is in 2010) be expected to react?" He further noted Sambi would have the power to dissolve the National Assembly and reestablish the Comoros as "an Islamic state." Azali said many changes, rationalizing the power structures and even diminishing the role of island presidents, were reasonable but untenable when the 12-year experiment of rotating presidency was in mid-course. Many Comorans have said it, but as the architect, Azali's comment carries weight, "the Fomboni and Beit-Salaam agreements and 2001 constitution are about unity and reconciliation - Sambi is jeopardizing that."

¶4. (SBU) While welcoming the role of the international community in the Comoros (African Union and United Nations, especially the United States, even France), Azali said they were naove in their dealings with Sambi. AU S/E Madeira breezes into town, negotiates commitments from everyone to dialogue, then leaves - only for Sambi to break his word. Azali asked that the United States, either in private or public, apply more pressure to Sambi or at least encourage him to consider the consequences of his actions. Echoing the opposition leaders, Azali accused Sambi of being detached from the Comoran reality and alienating a growing number of influential Comorans.

¶5. (SBU) Without intentional irony, Azali concluded that "Comorans must take matters into their own hands." He said Sambi's referendum contained changes he was not allowed to make, including interrupting the rotating presidency. Azali did not believe Comoran political, civic or religious leaders would allow the referendum to take place. Nor, he thought, would they tolerate Sambi's assumption of greater power if he did force his referendum through.

¶6. (SBU) Azali said he has three personal political choices to

make, as he also already decided to remain in the Comoros since leaving office. One, he could offer advice to the current government, but President Sambu, General Salimou, and other leaders have never called on him - not even during the Anjouan crisis. Two, he could join the political opposition, but he feels they are fragmented and powerless. His political party colleagues would participate, for example, in the expected February 18 meeting, but Azali would not appear in person. The third option is to watch and wait. Azali remains popular as the President who reunited the Comoros and the first leader to voluntarily leave power

17. (SBU) Note: Colonel Azali Assoumany took power in a coup d'etat in 1999, eventually ending Anjouan's secession and reuniting the country. He negotiated the Fomboni and Beit-Salam agreements, passed a new constitution in 2001, and was elected president in 2002. Respecting the constitution and rotating presidency, he handed power to President Sambu in May; 2006, the only peaceful and democratic transition in Comoran history. Azali's government was reportedly rife with corruption and several officials were briefly imprisoned in 2006. He founded the University of the Comoros in 2005 to create opportunity for young Comorans. Azali was, and remains, eager for close ties with the United States, evidenced by his cooperation in counterterrorism efforts, including expelling the "Al-Haramain" Islamic charity, which was suspected of ties to terrorism. End Note.

COMMENT:

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18. (SBU) The February 18 rally, at which opposition, religious, and traditional "notables" leaders are expected to stand together to denounce Sambu as illegitimate, will be telling in this tense

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environment. The President is out of the country in Marseille (where the diaspora reportedly booed him) and Senegal. AU S/E Madeira is due back February 24 to moderate the dialogue February 27, but unless he has another ace up his sleeve, there are going to be a lot of empty seats. Azali made no suggestion he would step in, though he hinted at the risks of returning to power when peoples' expectations are higher (citing Ratsiraka's last ground in Madagascar in Q late 1990s). Q there referendum leads toward renewed crisis, as the opposition are promising, another option would be for Azali to change his stance. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT